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THE CANINE SIDE OF THE CONVEN-
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THE CANINE SIDE OF THE CONVENTION

BY

ROBERT ESCHBACH

The following are some thoughts I have about the philosophy and application of use of dog guides. I believe this material can be helpful to other dog guide users and to blind persons in general. Hopefully it will bring some perspective to what happens to a dog guide when it becomes involved in the complexities of the National Federation of the Blind Convention.

Security, Equality, and Opportunity are by-words of the NFB. Dog guides, as well as white canes, speak to the truth of the motto and are an integral part of the organized movement of the blind to achieve these goals.

It has been instilled in me that the dog guide can be an important asset to the blind person. It can be, that is, if the relationship between master and dog is clearly understood and kept uppermost in all situations. My understanding of the relationship is this: We—the dog and I—form a business partnership. His job is to lead me safely and quickly through numerous situations which could be difficult, and thus give me increased mobility and freedom to be independent. My job is to care for him in a regular manner (feeding, grooming, consistent commands, routinely giving him opportunity to relieve himself, et cetera). If we both do our job according to the arrangement, we will achieve the desired goal for which he has been trained and which I seek. I place in him my trust and affection and he responds with obedience and loyalty. In addition, the maintenance of the partnership depends on a consistent discipline we expect

of each other. When this does not happen, the relationship is jeopardized, and the value of the dog as an asset is diminished greatly.

NFB Conventions present a real challenge to both master and dog. If the partnership is kept uppermost in the minds of both on a routine basis in everyday living, the challenge is one that can be handled easily and with great dignity. If, on the other hand, master and dog tend to sluff off the responsibilities of the relationship as a matter of course, the Convention can be a trial and burden not only to them but to people around them.

Consider the following: In normal situations when a dog guide approaches a crowd of people, he is used to them noticing him and, therefore, making way for him and his master so that there is little difficulty in getting through. What consternation he must be experiencing when he approaches a crowd of two thousand blind people who pay absolutely no attention to him, and in addition, are carrying around these long white sticks which must constantly be dodged.

Living in a strange room, drinking water that is different from what he is used to, having to stay quiet during long hours in a Convention room, being obliged to move about with his master through all hours of the day and night and seeing many other dogs whom he has never known before—all of these things can add up to a very confusing situation. It is times like this that the dog needs to be able to count on his master

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for appropriate commands and considerable attention.

Having attended a number of Conventions over the years, I share with you some tips on how to help the dog guide make it through a Convention with the least amount of difficulty.

(1) In feeding your dog, if you plan to take convenient packaged food which is different from his normal diet at home, start feeding him this new food at least one week before leaving home. You can determine how well he likes the food and is able to handle it without getting upset. Check for gasiness.

(2) Remember that your dog's stomach may be sensitive to a change in water. It is not advisable to allow your dog to drink as much as he wishes in a confusing, excited situation such as the Convention. This is true even when we are at the Convention during the month of July.

(3) Dogs—like people—can become ill. Dogs may indeed get diarrhea or vomit due to the tensions surrounding him or the change in routine. If this happens, call the hotel management immediately for assistance and let them clean up the disturbance. Don't attempt to clean it up yourself and not report the incident.

(4) There is nothing routine about a Convention, and you may enjoy late evening parties which are quite different from your usual pattern at home. It is important to take the dog for relief on a reasonably regular basis regardless of the temptation to join others in their activities. You can always come back to the party, and though you may have missed some of the action,

you can prevent your dog's soiling through no fault of his.

(5) When seated in the Convention or in a restaurant, keep your dog under control. The dog should lie as close to you and under your seat as possible. *Never* allow the dog to lie in aisles or other areas where people must walk.

(6) Always know what your dog is doing. Your dog should not be allowed to stand and wander at the end of the leash.

(7) When talking to somebody in a hallway or on the street where others are going by, keep your dog at "sit" position. If you allow him to stand he will wander and sniff passersby and be out of position. If you make him lie down, people may have to step over him.

(8) Conventions are an exciting time for everyone—including the dogs. It seems perfectly appropriate that the dog might bark during a round of applause, but it is extremely inappropriate if the dog whines when he should be quiet.

(9) Just as people enjoy meeting other people, the dogs certainly would like to make the acquaintance of their canine friends who are in attendance. If your dog tends to be protective or growls at other dogs, he should be immediately corrected.

(10) Many people will attempt to give your dog a pat. That is to be expected. Don't let other people continue to fondle your dog and be affectionate to him beyond a friendly greeting. The best protection against your dog misbehaving because other persons are paying too much attention is your consistent attention and affection to the animal.

Over the past several years I have been aware of a number of complaints about dog guides and their masters at Conventions. Many of these complaints are valid. Let me make the following suggestions to you if you observe a dog guide and his master not behaving in what you think is an appropriate manner:

(1) Tell the person his dog is not behaving or is making a nuisance of himself with you. That allows the master to take corrective action if necessary.

(2) Do not pay too much attention to the dog guides. They have a job to do and your attention can only distract them. If you really think you would like to pet the dog, ask his master if it is all right.

(3) If you are reluctant to speak directly to the person about a problem, bring your concern to Pat Comorato, chairman of the

Dog Guide Committee, or to me, and we can assist in resolving the difficulty.

To the dog guide user who works consistently well with his animal, many of the tips mentioned above will be easily followed. On the other hand, if you think of your dog as a pet or a companion first and a business partner second, you may have trouble managing the dog effectively in the strange environs of a Convention. If you suspect that you will not be able to manage your dog effectively, then I suggest you make arrangements to leave your dog at home. You will be happier and I can assure you the dog will be happier.

Here's looking forward to the best Convention ever—not only for the NFB, but also the dog guides who accompany their masters through the welter of confusion, hard work, and pleasure. □

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